

## **Teacher Perspectives on Reflective Journal Writing**

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### **Abstract**

This research aims to present teachers with concrete data demonstrating the potential for reflective journal writing to evoke change on an individual and community level. These aims were addressed by interviewing three highly experienced teachers currently working in the field, all of whom incorporate reflective journal writing into their classrooms on a regular basis. After an in-depth analysis of the interviews, various themes emerged. These themes include: teacher strategies, impact on the classroom community, impact on the student, and finally, challenges with reflective journal writing.

My hope is that this work will provide teachers with an understanding of the impact of reflective journal writing and its ability to support a variety of learnings, including both emotional and academic growth.

### **Key Words**

Literacy  
Voice  
Self- concept  
Community  
Feedback

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## **Chapter 1: INTRODUCTION**

### **Introduction to the Research Study**

Student engagement is a struggle for teachers across North America and, as a result, maintaining a high literacy standard is becoming a greater challenge. Students are growing more and more disinterested in the act of both reading and writing, and it is predicted that Canada could experience a 25% increase in low literacy by 2031 (Canadian Council on Learning, 2001). Under these circumstances, the Ontario Ministry of Education (2011) remains consistent with its promotion of the importance and pivotal role of these skills:

A solid foundation in literacy and numeracy gives students the widest range of choices in their academic career and beyond. When students develop strong reading, writing and math skills early in life, they are less likely to get discouraged and drop out of school later.

Students today are growing up in the new information age and are in need of different teaching strategies and reading materials. Canadian youth are stimulated on a daily basis as they have constant access to information via the immediacy of the Internet. With the growing number of gadgets and mediums of Social Media, material is accessible within seconds and it is difficult for teachers to compete. As a result, it is becoming more challenging to engage students with traditional learning and/or teaching methods.

Teachers are more concerned than ever with adapting traditional pedagogies in order to engage students of the twenty-first century. Teachers are making attempts to reinvent the classroom and what it means to be a student by creating a more accessible, interactive educational experience. Educators are moving beyond teacher-based instructional learning and a considerably more student-centered approach is dominating

the scene in classrooms (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013). Cooperative learning, student choice, and limited lecture-based instruction are a few strategies instigated by this change in pedagogy. One of the more over-arching changes brought upon by this development is the act of providing the student with voice. Students are now provided with a greater opportunity to control how they are learning and what they are learning. This results in a deeper, more authentic engagement within the learning process, the opportunity for students to make more real world connections and the chance for students to evolve in a metacognitive way. Students are learning how they learn and becoming aware of themselves as learners (O'Donnell, D'Amico, Schmid, Reeve, and Smith, 2008).

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this exploratory study is to investigate teacher perspectives on reflective journal writing, as well as the benefits and/or challenges experienced by these teachers as a result of this implementation.

For the purpose of this paper I chose to use the term “reflective journal writing” as it is the most effective representation of the focus of my study. There is often a distinction made between “journal writing” and “reflective writing”. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the definition of the journal itself is “a record of events or matters of personal interest kept by any one for his own use, in which entries are made day by day, or as the events occur”. It is not explicitly stated that journal writing requires the writer to participate in the act of “reflection”, which the Oxford English Dictionary defines as “a thought that is expressed in words, *esp.* one written down; a considered remark made after devoting careful thought to a subject; a philosophical observation”.

Nevertheless, I would argue that the act of recording personal experiences or even the fact that the writer is aware of what constitutes one of his or her personal thoughts or opinions, requires a certain level of reflection. It is true that during specifically reflective writing activities that the instructor will explicitly state the goal is to reflect (Douillard & Labbo, 2002; Green, 2011; Kathpalia & Heah, 2008). However, I believe that individuals are reflecting in both activities, and therefore my use of the term “reflective journal writing” encompasses both of these actions.

This paper aims to explain the importance of using reflective journal writing in the classroom, and to present teachers with concrete data demonstrating the potential for reflective journal writing to evoke change on an individual level. The intent of this project is to provide teachers with an effective way to give each of their students a voice. This strategy will in turn allow planning to be more specifically catered to the needs of the students, resulting in greater student success and a deeper fulfillment of the expectations of the Ontario Ministry of Education, specifically within the “Writing” expectations (2006). This paper also aims to encourage teachers to use student-centered activities, specifically reflective journal writing, as a means to support different types of learning, including both emotional and academic growth.

### **Research Questions**

The specific focus of this research is to explore the impact of reflective writing in the classroom, with a focus on teacher perspectives. The following research question guides my study:

1. How are teachers implementing reflective journal writing in the current classroom? What are some benefits and/or challenges experienced by these teachers?

In addition, the following sub-questions will be explored:

1. What specific strategies or instructional methods do teachers report using in order to incorporate reflective journal writing into the classroom?
2. Do reflective journal writing activities help teachers get to know their students in a more meaningful or authentic way? Has the teacher experienced a change in their relationship with their students once the journal writing sessions have been implemented?
3. Have teachers noticed any connection or relation between changes in attitude, confidence or motivation levels within the individual as a result of participating in reflective journal writing?

### **Background of the Researcher**

I am currently a second year graduate student in the Junior/Intermediate section within the Master of Teaching program at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE) at the University of Toronto, and my teaching subject is English. My interest in reflective journal keeping existed prior to coming to OISE. I grew up keeping a journal, and have fond memories of recounting the adventures of my day on paper. I was an emotional child growing up, and often had trouble expressing myself confidently in new or foreign situations. Therefore, throughout my early years and into my adolescence, I relied heavily amount on writing in order to communicate. This action of writing gave me a voice I did not believe I was capable of, and provided me with the important

opportunity to get to know myself on a deeper level. This act of writing helped build my confidence and I was eventually able to share my thoughts and opinions with others.

During my first practicum placement, it became apparent that teachers use many different forms of journal writing and in different ways; however, the writing activities were rarely open-ended and were often kept quite narrow as a result of teacher instruction. When I investigated as to why the writing often included teacher prompts, I was told two things; one, that some students are uncomfortable or unable to come up with their own ideas, and secondly, that the teacher wanted to guide the writing in order to keep it within the confines of what he or she hoped to assess. This experience taught me that reflective journal writing could be used in numerous different ways, but also pushed me to explore a more open-ended form and to focus on how the activity has the ability to impact students on a more personal level.

Throughout my academic career and experiences as a Teacher Candidate, I have become increasingly aware of the fact that students are often not inspired by the written word. There seems to be a lack of interest in both reading and writing. Therefore, my personal goal for this paper is to share my passion for writing and the positive consequences students can experience from actively participating in reflective journal writing. I have seen what authentic writing has the ability to do and, if used correctly, it can change the lives of students by not only motivating them to write and engaging them in an authentic writing experience, but also by helping them get to know themselves on a more metacognitive level.

**Overview**

The Masters of Teaching Research Project (MTRP) is divided into five chapters. The first chapter includes the introduction, along with a discussion of the purpose of study, a list of the research questions and a brief description of how I came to be inspired to explore this topic further. Chapter two presents an extensive review of the literature relating to the topic in question, and is organized thematically. Chapter three describes the methods and procedure used in this study, along with information regarding the same participants, data collection instruments and a few of the limitations of my research. The fourth chapter identifies the participants and describes the study's findings as it addresses the research questions. The final chapter includes the implications of my research, further recommendations for practice and study, and a brief conclusion. Finally, references and a list of appendixes follow.

## Chapter 2: THE LITERATURE REVIEW

### What is reflective journal writing?

In the contemporary classroom, teachers are being faced with modern, twenty-first century challenges. As mentioned in the introduction, student engagement and motivation are daily struggles for teachers and approaches to teaching have been evolving over the past decade. Effective pedagogy is migrating away from traditional “chalk and talk” methods of teaching (*i.e.* the teacher stands at the front of the classroom and lectures, as he or she records information on the black board, which students are expected to record word for word in their own notebooks) and toward the inclusion of more student-led activities (Ontario Ministry of Education). One of these pedagogical changes for many educators is the inclusion of more student choice, and more specifically, the implementation of reflective journal writing.

Though there are many different approaches to the implementation of this writing, there are certain characteristics of the writing itself that remain somewhat more consistent. In order to understand the content of this paper, a couple of the defining characteristics of reflective journal writing should be noted. For example, the primary focus of reflective journal writing is not to develop a stronger understanding of writing conventions (Graves, 2004). Although research shows that elementary students demonstrate dramatic skill development within all three major categories of writing conventions (*i.e.* correct spelling, words used, and correct punctuation) as a result of daily reflective journal writing activities (Jones & East, 2008, p. 116; McGrail & Davis, 2011), this is not the main purpose. Despite this common correlation between the development of writing conventions and reflective journal writing, the activity’s instruction rarely places the emphasis on proper spelling or proofreading to ensure the correct use of

grammar. Students are encouraged to write without trepidation or the fear of losing marks from the incorrect use of writing conventions. McGrail & Davis (2011) recognize in their own study that as students' incorrect use of writing conventions increases so do their levels of creativity (p. 431). Therefore, focusing on writing conventions could potentially be limiting creativity.

The pressure of achieving a passing grade is not the usual focus of reflective journal writing either. The common purpose is to engage in an authentic, consistent form of writing (Douillard & Labbo, 2002; Graves, 1994 & 2004; Greene & Mitcham 2012; Lambirth & Gooch, 2008; Sesta, 2008). Consistent meaning, on a daily basis or as often as possible, and authentic meaning not prescribed, limited, or controlled in a major way by the instructor (Sesta, 2008, p. 34). Jenny Sesta (2008) uses her experience with dialogue journals within her classroom to make the argument that if educators make the conscious decision to control their students' writing, it limits the authenticity and restricts the potential positives experienced by both the student and the teacher. There is often no expectation set up that students need to reach in order to be considered successful. The goal and purpose is the participation in the writing itself; the end product is not often considered the point of this exercise, unless presented otherwise (Jones & East, 2010).

This does not mean that "publishing" this work is not important. Although the common purpose is to engage students in the process of writing, an important step to consider is how or whether the work will be published. The success level of this writing exercise is often linked to the feedback the student receives (Douillard & Labbo, 2002; Greene, 2011; Jones & East, 2008; Kathpalia & Heah, 2011; McGrail & Davis, 2011; Sesta, 2008). There are a variety of approaches to this dilemma. With the growing use of

technology in the classroom, some teachers use the Internet as a space for students to publish their work in order for their peers and/or teachers to provide feedback and support (Lee, 2010; McGrail & Davis, 2011). There is also the more traditional approach, which involves the teacher providing written feedback for each of his or her students (Douillard & Labbo, 2002; Graves, 2004; Jones & East, 2008; Greene, 2011; Kathpalia & Heah, 2011; Sesta, 2008). There are pros and cons to each, which will be discussed in more detail later on in the literature review; however, the most important aspect is that, although it is not mandatory, publishing the writing is at times correlated to student success and may impact what students gain from the experience.

### **Why do we need to incorporate reflective journal writing into the classroom?**

There are numerous arguments that support the place of reflective journal writing in the classroom. There is the general statement that it is a way to engage our students in the act of writing (Douillard & Labbo, 2002; Graves, 1994 & 2004; Greene & Mitcham, 2012; Lambirth & Gooch, 2006). However, the possibilities are significantly deeper and richer than that. Engagement may be the overarching incentive for educators to include these types of activities in the classroom; nonetheless, the opportunities have the potential to reverberate beyond the immediate and to impact students on a fundamental level.

**Providing your student with a voice.** In the past, students were passive agents in the attainment of knowledge. However, with the focus now on student-centered learning, educators are both required and encouraged to take students beyond passivity. The newly implemented Social Studies, Geography & History curriculum (2013) is a representative example of this change, with its focus on critical thinking and student involvement over content. In the modern schoolhouse students are encouraged to bring themselves whole-

heartedly into their respective classrooms and into their learning. Teachers are no longer encouraged to view themselves as “math teachers” or “elementary school teachers”, but educators who teach math or elementary school to a group of unique individuals (O’Donnell et al., 2008, p. 102). Education is evolving. Effective pedagogy now includes a variety of activities that provide students with choice and the opportunity to participate in a variety of meaningful activities (Jones & East, 2010).

Reflective journal writing can be viewed as one of these meaningful activities, because it provides students with a voice (Sesta, 2008). Within the writing experience, students have the chance to determine both the direction and content of their writing, and to experience authentic engagement within the writing process (Douillard & Labbo, 2002; Graves, 1994 & 2004; Greene & Mitcham, 2012; Lambirth & Goouch, 2008; Sesta, 2008). Sesta (2008) argues “to be relevant, learning processes need to recruit, rather than attempt to ignore and erase, the different subjectivities, interests, intentions, commitments and purposes that students bring to learning” (p. 32). She acknowledges that reflective journal writing is an appropriate, relevant learning exercise, as it provides students with the appropriate opportunity to bring their own experiences into their classroom. Providing students with a voice and the chance to make broader connections between their own lives and their classroom experiences is one of the potential results of incorporating effective reflective journal writing instruction into the classroom (Lambirth & Goouch, 2006, p. 150).

When students are challenged to respond to open-ended prompts the world of writing becomes accessible for all students. When there are no limits to restrict an individual’s creative interpretation, the sky truly is the limit, and it is what students want

(Bernard & Slade, 2009, p. 361). The difference between open-ended and closed-ended questions is apparent through the contrast of open and closed questions. Imagine students were provided with one of two following prompts: one, “Our theme of the day was Climate Change, list and explain at least two of the effects we discussed as a class”; or two, “Climate Change is...”. Think of the possible responses to each of those prompts. Each of the prompts has a different level of open-endedness, and will limit or facilitate student responses in different ways. The first prompt is relatively closed, as the teacher has a clear expectation of what the student response will be. This is similar to a traditional test-question, is very restricting and perhaps even stress inducing. The second prompt is clearly more open-ended. The prompt facilitates student interpretation, and the voice of each individual will undoubtedly come through in both his or her writing and topic choice. Open-ended prompts are arguably the only type of instruction appropriate to incite the reflective journal writing exercise.

If students are provided with truly open-ended prompts, the responses and learnings involved in these writing exercises have an unlimited number of possible outcomes, and student voice has the chance to ring true. It is only through these open-ended writing activities that “we provide engaging opportunities for all children to express their feelings and concerns; to connect to and develop their literate identities and at the same time strive to promote the intellectual rigour... children are capable of expressing” (Sesta, p. 32), which is fundamental to student engagement and impacts the level of student motivation (Bernard & Slade, 2009; O’Donnell et al., 2008).

The act of reflective journal writing provides students with voice and the opportunity to act and/or express themselves as individuals. In addition, Jones & East

(2010) argue that students grow more comfortable with this personal expression, and with sharing their voices through writing over time. Students will be able to “successfully communicate their ideas”, they will be motivated and challenged to “spread their wings” as writers, they will be provided with the occasion to develop “meaningful writing skills” as a result of practicing daily and the “endeavor has the potential to increase students' writing confidence and control over written language” (p. 113, 121). Therefore, not only does reflective journal writing provide students with voice, but if practiced consistently it also has the ability to positively impact the students' level of confidence regarding the act of sharing their personal voice within their writing.

**Interdisciplinary and cross-age success.** Within the twenty-first century classroom in Ontario, subjects are no longer separate entities, taught and assessed independently of each other. The Ministry of Education has published a series of documents entitled “Think Literacy: Cross-Curricular Approach”. These documents encourage teachers to make interdisciplinary connections in order to make learning more relevant for students, and therefore more meaningful and authentic. These Ministry documents span across grade level and subjects including Business Studies, Computer Studies, Music, and Visual Arts, to name a few. “Think Literacy” promotes journal writing as an effective activity to connect Literacy to a number of other subjects. For example, “Think Literacy: Cross-Curricular Approaches, Grade 7-12” (2005) encourages teachers to use a variety of literacy instruction within the math classroom which includes, but is not limited to, creating a word wall, using the Frayer Model, and journal writing. In fact, sixteen of the seventy-eight pages are dedicated to the explanation of how journal writing can be effectively incorporated into the math classroom. The journal section

includes a variety of prompts such as personal writing, for example “When I'm asked a question in class I...” (p. 37) or more reflective prompts for self-assessment, such as “I think I could do better if...” (p. 38). The inclusion and stress the Ministry places on incorporating reflective journal writing within a variety of classroom environments supports the implementation of this writing strategy. With that being said, it is important to note that although these Ministry documents promote cross-curriculum connections, the impact of these documents has unfortunately had a limited impact.

I was pleasantly surprised to discover how reflective journal writing is used and recommended in such an interdisciplinary manner. Throughout my research I discovered that not only does the Ontario Ministry of Education support its cross-curricular use, but many different professional disciplines also draw on its positive potential and promote its use within their own systems. For example, Ibarreta and McLeod (2004) explore the impact of implementing journal writing within the second-year baccalaureate nursing students' clinical practicum. Students were required to reflect on significant events that occurred in their practicum, and most “responded very favourably to their experience in journal writing” (2004, p. 134, 136). Ibarreta and McLeod (2004) recognize the increase in student ability regarding acts of “critical thinking and self-directed learning”, both of which, they argue, are critical aspects in the students' learning processes (p. 136).

Along with this example in nursing, I discovered the use of reflective journal writing in preservice teacher programs (Lee, 2008), within an undergraduate educational psychology program (Cisero, 2006), and as an activity in an adult literacy ESL program (Larrotta, 2009) to name a few. In all three of the articles mentioned above, there were positive successes associated with the use of reflective journal writing. Some of the

successes include: the improvement of writing skills, the development of an inclusive community, and/or the attainment of new or the development of preexisting reflective skills. It is easily apparent that reflective journal writing has experienced interdisciplinary successes and is recommended by the Ministry to be implemented with the classroom in order to create a more relevant and cross-curricular experience for all students.

**The impact of an audience.** One approach to the practice of reflective journal writing involves the act of a student writing for only his or her own enjoyment and personal development; no one reads the product and it is not shared with classmates. However, the process is evolving and a significant amount of research was discovered in which the student's writing is "published", making it a noteworthy addition to this paper. This act of publishing, whether for the entire class or only for the teacher, provides the student with the unique and meaningful experience of writing for an audience (Graves, 2004; Lambirth & Goouch, 2006).

Writing in itself is a powerful act. There is a sense of self-awareness and pride that comes with the act of writing for oneself; however, if no one ever reads the words, some may ask "what is the point?". This is where the power of an audience can greatly impact the writers in a classroom (Graves, 2004; Greene & Mitcham, 2012; Jones & East, 2010; Lambirth & Goouch, 2006; Sesta, 2008). Although reflective journal writing does not have to result in a form of feedback, Graves (2004) argues that teacher feedback is integral to the writing process (p. 91). The students need feedback in order to develop or grow as writers and individuals. Lambirth & Goouch (2006) argue that only "where teachers, children and others work together to inspire, entice and support developing writers, when choice, intention, form, time and audience are within their control, children

write well” (p.148). Therefore, if the purpose of a reflective journal writing assignment is to improve writing skills, perhaps an audience is the most effective path. However, it is important to note that it is not the only path.

***Teacher feedback.*** If the students’ writing is never read by anyone, or if the teacher never provides feedback to his or her students’, an opportunity may be lost. Reflective journal writing not only provides students with the positive experience to express and become confident with their own voice, but it also provides teachers with the unique opportunity to truly hear their students (Greene & Mitcham, 2012; Jones & East, 2010; Lambirth & Gooch, 2006; Sesta 2008). If the teacher encourages his or her students to engage in an authentic writing experience, the results have the potential to be an incredibly useful and influential tool for the teacher. Graves (2004) argues that educators must conference with their students throughout the process. These conferences allow for differentiated instruction to take place and for educators to get to know their students on both a personal and academic level, enabling the teacher to “properly identify and target the student's abilities” moving forward (Jones & East, 2010, p. 113). Both the pieces of writing and the student-teacher conference have the ability to provide teachers with the information necessary to tailor lessons for their students, supporting their specific areas of growth and peaking their genuine interest (Jones & East, 2010, p. 113). This practice has the potential to result in stronger student engagement and more successful writers (Keene & Zimmerman as cited in Jones & East, 2010, p. 113). Therefore, an important aspect of reflective journal writing and a noteworthy benefit of the activity results from the student-teacher interaction.

***Peer interaction.*** Alongside teacher feedback, writing for an audience of peers

has the ability to provide students with an even stronger motivation to write (Lee, 2010; McGrail & Davis, 2011; Sesta 2008). Reflective journal writing practices have expanded into the world of technology and some educators now use the tool of blogging to create a stronger sense of community. Through the act of blogging, students receive instant feedback from peers and come to learn the importance and responsibility of writing for an audience (McGrail & Davis, 2011). McGrail and Davis (2011) recognize the growth experienced by the students within their study. The students were initially confident writers; however, the act of learning to write for an audience in the form of a blog, and the change in their focus (students went from focusing primarily on their own needs as a learner and a writer to focusing on the needs of their audience as well as their own), resulted in both a stronger motivation to write and also in more authentic, honest work (p. 425, p. 428). Students also developed a deeper understanding of writing conventions. The audience provided students with more motivation, and students' writing skills showed progress throughout the process (p. 430, p. 431).

Lina Lee (2010) made a similar discovery within her university students when she implemented a reflective writing journal in the form of a classroom blog. Students experienced higher levels of motivation to write as a result of knowing their peers would be reading their work (p. 219). In the end, Lee discovered that not only did her students' reflective thinking skills develop throughout the process, but alongside the consistently rising level of motivation, her students also reported to truly enjoy the reflective writing activity (p. 220-23).

Publishing impacts the future development of writers in a conventional manner. There is the timeless argument about spelling, along with other writing conventions, and

whether it truly matters. The common answer: using the correct convention *only* matters when the work is being published (Frank Smith, 1982 as cited in Graves, 2004). If students' writing is never read and their words are not published, the opportunity to develop writing skills may be lost.

Each approach to reflective journal writing has its own benefits and drawbacks. Although some instructors or researchers believe an audience is required for students to truly benefit from this activity, it depends on the purpose of the writing. If the goal of the reflective journal writing is to develop writing conventions, then perhaps an audience of peers is more effective. If the goal is to develop reflective thinking skills or to participate in personal reflection, perhaps publishing is unethical. Or, perhaps the goal is to provide the student with choice, in which case an audience may not matter. The difference is great: is the purpose to write for oneself or is the purpose to write for others?

### **The Other Benefits of Reflective Journal Writing**

There are many academic benefits of reflective journal writing, a few of which were discussed above: the development of writing conventions, and understanding the unique responsibility of writing for an audience, to name a few. Although there is an obvious focus on the academic development of students within the school system, the role of psychology is becoming increasingly important. The topic of educational psychology is becoming an essential aspect within education, and many, if not all, education programs require preservice teachers to complete psychology courses in order to fulfill the requirements of the degree.

While teachers are by no means required to be psychologists in order to be considered effective teachers, a basic understanding of why students react a certain way

can be helpful in the classroom. Motivation and engagement, as mentioned earlier, are a struggle for teachers within a variety of settings and there have been countless articles published on the topic of motivating students. Douillard and Labbo (2002), and Greene and Mitcham (2012) recognize the impact the use of reflective journal writing has on student motivation. They argue that this writing strategy engages students for numerous reasons, some of which we will explore within the following section of this literature review.

**Reflective journal writing promotes autonomy.** Promoting autonomy is vitally important within the classroom. Autonomy, defined as “the psychological need to experience self-direction in the initiation and regulation of one’s behavior” (Deci & Ryan, 1985 as cited in O’Donnell et al., 2008, p. 342), plays a pivotal role on the level of student engagement and motivation. It is proven that those “students with autonomy-supportive-teachers show greater intrinsic motivation, mastery motivation, positive emotion, creativity, conceptual understanding, prosocial behavior, academic performance, and persistence in school”, all of which play an obvious role in education and result in a more successful experience for the student (O’Donnell et al., 2008, p. 343).

When it comes to the development of autonomous youth, providing students with choice is one strategy teachers use; however, “choice” is not specific enough. The type of choice the teacher provides his or her students with greatly impacts the legitimacy of the claim of developing autonomy. For example, if a teacher offers a choice between A or B, the choice is very limited; however, if the choice is presented in the form of an open-ended questions, then it will more likely provide the students with an autonomous

experience (O'Donnell et al., 2008, p. 343). In fact, Love, Burns and Buell (2007) argue “too much guidance and structure can inhibit children’s motivation and independence” and result in a negative relationship with writing (p. 16). Therefore, if choice is directly connected with autonomy and one of the characteristics of reflective journal writing is choice, the writing activity itself provides the students participating in the activity with “autonomous opportunities” (Jones & East, 2010, p. 112; Lambirth & Goouch, 2008, p. 152; Love et al., 2007, p. 16).

**Reflective journal writing promotes a sense of belonging and builds community.** Community and a sense of belonging are directly connected to the motivation to learn, student engagement and therefore academic success. Students learn more effectively in environments where they feel safe and respected (Greene & Mitcham, 2012). The Ontario Ministry of Education acknowledges the importance of building a positive school and classroom community or “climate”, in fact the “Shaping a Culture of Respect in our Schools: Promoting Safe and Healthy Relationships” document published in 2008 refers to safe schools as a “prerequisite for learning”. It states the following:

There is a direct link between success in school and the school environment in which student learning takes place. Students are more able and more motivated to do well and achieve their full potential in schools that have a positive school climate and in which they feel safe and supported. A school climate may be defined as the sum total of all the personal relationships within a school. When these relationships are founded in mutual acceptance and inclusion, and are modeled by all, a culture of respect becomes the norm. (p. 1)

Consequently, if a student does not feel respected by his or her peers, or like a worthy member of a greater community, he or she will not live up to his or her potential.

The act of reflective journal writing has the ability to contribute to the development of an effective learning environment and positive school climate. Reflective journal writing can be viewed as an independent task; however, it is proven that when all students participate in the same writing activity the development of classroom cohesion and community advances (Love et al., 2007, p. 17). Students do not necessarily need to share their work; the simple act of everyone, no matter the academic level or personal interest of the student, participating in the same activity at the same time has shown to result in a stronger sense of community (Love et al., 2007).

Although not required, the act of sharing may also result in a stronger community, and therefore a stronger sense of motivation and student engagement. As a result of experiencing the reflective journal writing process as a group, with the teacher having made the decision to publish the students' work in the form of a blog, students became more confident not only in themselves as writers and learners, but they also became more accepting of and emotionally connected to one another (Lee, 2008, p. 223). The participants showed signs of social development, as a sense of community and belonging developed, alongside a growing awareness of the needs of themselves and others (Lee, 2008).

Greene and Mitcham (2012) take a noteworthy approach to classroom community, as they acknowledge that one of its defining features is the "importance of respecting individual voices" (p.14). It is slightly ironic that an effective community takes the time to admit that it is in fact a group of individuals with their own voices and

opinions. They argue that it is important to acknowledge not only the voices, but also the “diverse stories and experiences” students bring into the classroom community (p. 14). Therefore, one could argue that reflective journal writing aids in the development of a positive community in the classroom, as it provides students with a voice. Consequently, if implemented with the intent to develop a stronger sense of classroom community, reflective journal writing can be a potential strategy educators call upon to motivate their students throughout their educational development.

### **The Role of the Self-concept in Learning**

This paper chooses to explore the connection between reflective journal writing and the student self-concept. In order to explore the impact of a student’s self-concept on learning, we must first define the term “self-concept”. According to O’Donnell et al. (2008) self-concept can be defined as “the set of beliefs the individual uses to mentally represent or understand his or her sense of self”, in other words they are a student’s mental representations or mental models of themselves (remember that a “mental model” is “a student’s enduring beliefs and expectations about what they are like and what other people are like”) (p. 102, p. 75). In layman’s terms, the self-concept is how one views oneself and what he or she is capable of. With this definition, it becomes apparent how a student’s self-concept would be relevant to his or her experience within the world of education. How can we expect students to be successful if they view themselves as incapable of achieving that success?

The purpose of modern education is to teach the entire student: body, mind, and spirit, and to promote a “healthy sense of self”, in other words, to promote the development of a healthy self-concept (O’Donnell et al., 2008, p. 102). Crave et al.

(2003) claim that educators seek to do this for two reasons: “First, they believe that enhancing the self-concept is a desirable educational goal in its own right. Second, they believe that an enhanced self-concept will enhance other valuable educational goals, such as academic achievement” (as cited in O’Donnell et al., 2008, p. 102). These two goals stress the correlation between the student self-concept and student success. Thus, if educators want their students to be academically successful, one potential approach could be a psychological one; the act of addressing how the students view themselves (*i.e.* the students’ academic self-concept).

**Self-concept and academic achievement: a case study.** It is impossible to ignore the role of the student self-concept in relation to academic achievement. If a student does not perceive himself or herself as capable, he or she will more than likely not be highly successful (Bong & Skallvik, 2003; Chapman, Tunmer, & Prochnow, 2000; Green, Liem, Martin, Colmar, Marsh & McInerney, 2012). Chapman et al. (2000) explore the correlation between a group of students’ reading self-concepts and academic success. They discovered that those students who struggled before the reading lesson even began were in possession of a more negative reading self-concept from the beginning, when compared to their peers who were considered stronger readers and were more confident. Three years passed, and the study continued. In the end, those students who had previously existing negative self-concepts had not only developed an even greater negative reading self-concept, but had also experienced even lower academic success. It was also discovered that those students with a lower reading self-concept read significantly less than their peers who possessed a higher reading self-concept, which

made it even less likely their reading would improve (p. 707). This example demonstrates the great impact of a negative self-concept on academic achievement and motivation.

### **Summary**

This literature review touches on some of the reasons reflective journal writing is a valuable tool for teachers to utilize in their classrooms. The review begins with the difficult task of defining reflective journal writing, and continues with a few reasons why reflective journal writing should be incorporated into the classroom. The reasons are many; however, this paper focuses on the fact that reflective journal writing provides students with voice, the activity has numerous interdisciplinary and cross-age successes, and finally that publishing work allows students to experience the positive impacts of writing for an audience.

The literature review acknowledges the connection between reflective journal writing and the world of psychology. In the modern classroom, a stress is placed on the importance for educators to be aware of their students' psychology and of the psychological implications of the activities they are asking their students to be a part of. In the case of reflective journal writing, the research demonstrates that student autonomy, classroom community, and a sense of belonging are all implicated. Finally, this review of the literature comments on the connection between the student self-concept and learning. How a student perceives one's self (*i.e.* his or her self-concept) impacts his or her level of motivation, and therefore academic achievement.

For the reasons presented in the literature review, and with the documents published by the Ontario Ministry of Education in mind, this research project aims to establish the correlation between reflective journal writing and the development of the

student in the classroom.

### **Chapter 3: METHODOLOGY**

#### **Procedure**

This research is a qualitative study with the focus on teacher perspectives and experience. This study investigates how teachers are implementing reflective journal writing in their current classroom, and the benefits and/or challenges experienced by these teachers. My data was collected from face-to-face interviews with teachers who have had direct experience with the implementation of reflective journal writing within their own classrooms. The intention of the data collection is to represent a variety of teachers' personal experiences and opinions on the impact of reflective journal writing. My goal is to shed light on the potential of this writing strategy and to achieve a "deeper understanding of social phenomena than would be obtained from purely quantitative methods" (Gill, Stewart, Treasure, and Chadwick, 2008, p. 292).

#### **Instruments of Data Collection**

The data for this study was collected through multiple one-on-one interviews. The interviews took place in person, where the participants were asked a series of questions (see Appendix B). A lot of care, consideration and preparation went into the development of the interview questions. As Rowley (2012) states, only when the interviews have been appropriately designed does the experience have the "potential to generate a range of insights and understandings that might be useful" (p. 262). One design aspect that was taken into deep consideration was the question progression. The interview began with a series of easy to address questions and developed to include more opinion-based material by the end (Doody, 2013, p. 30). This progression allowed for the participants to become more comfortable with the process and myself, the interviewer, and resulted in a more insightful experience.

The interview was semi-structured. The list of interview questions was prepared ahead of time, but there was also the opportunity for both myself and the participants to deviate from the prepared questions during the actual interview. This allowed for the “discovery or elaboration of information that... may not have previously been thought of as pertinent by the research team” (Gill et al., 2008, p. 291).

Following are a few of the questions I incorporated into the interview:

- Have you noticed any changes in attitude, confidence or motivation levels within your students as a result of participating in reflective journal writing?
- What initially inspired you to use reflective journal writing in your classroom?
- Which specific strategies or instructional methods do you use in order to incorporate reflective journal writing into the classroom?
- Does the information you gain regarding your students throughout this activity have any impact on your future planning or the direction of your lessons?
- What challenges have you experienced as a result of using reflective writing in your classroom?
- What external and/or internal aspects do you recognize as having an impact on the success level of each different experience involving reflective writing?
- What strategies would you recommend to other teachers looking to implement reflective journal writing into their own classrooms?

### **Participants**

This research study involved three participants. The participants were recruited through preexisting school contacts, word of mouth and participant recommendation throughout selected schools in Southern New Brunswick. The participants are all very experienced

(ranging from 20-30 years of experience) and their current grades taught range from kindergarten to grade four. This range provided the opportunity to cross-compare the different perspectives from different grade teachers, but also to see the potential overlap stemming from having a similar level of experience. All participants have experience with the implementation of reflective journal writing in their classrooms, as was a requirement to participate in this study.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

The data collection consisted of three separate interviews, one with each of the three participants. The interview time ranged between 40-75 minutes, depending solely on the length of the answers provided by the participant. Although follow up interviews were available as a possibility if pertinent questions remained unanswered within the original time frame, another interview was never deemed necessary by either me or the participants. All three interviews took place in person at a time and location of the participant's own choosing. The interviews were recorded, and upon completion, they were transcribed in full into individual Word documents. The transcription process was completed within a timely manner of the interview itself, in order to recollect nuances and preserve the authenticity of the process.

The transcriptions were read thoroughly multiple times in order to extract recurring themes or ideas. Important quotes and insights were highlighted for easy accessibility during the completion of the Findings chapter. Similar or supporting themes were consolidated into four overarching themes. The themes will be discussed in full detail in the following two chapters.

**Ethical Review Procedures**

All potential participants were provided with a formal letter of consent to be signed before the commencement of the study (see Appendix A). The form clearly outlines the purpose of the study, and the steps involved. Participants were informed that they have the right to refuse to answer any questions and that stopping the interview at any point is within their control. Participants were also informed that the interview would be recorded with a device and later transcribed for furthering processing. The participants were provided with the option to review any information collected during the interview, at which point content could have potentially be removed upon their request, although this step was deemed unnecessary by all three participants. Lastly, the participant's right to privacy was addressed. Participants were informed that the final report would contain absolutely no information that could reveal their identity (*i.e.* name, school, school board, physical description, etc.). They were made aware of the fact that the only individual cognizant of the participants' identities would be my faculty supervisor, and finally that the documents will be destroyed after the successful publication of the research. Finally, the participants were informed that the findings would be used to complete a final assignment, which includes a paper and an informal presentation to my classmates.

All of this information was made available within the consent letter provided to the participants before commencing the study, and it was discussed in full detail moments before the interview took place. The interview did not proceed until all the participants' questions and/or concerns had been addressed.

**Limitations**

I foresee a few potential limitations for my study. The major limitation of my research is its size, which is a direct result of the time and financial restrictions placed on this study. As the data collection will be completed through solely through the use of a very limited number of interviews, the findings will only provide voice to a limited few. Another potential limitation will stem from a personal bias. I am an avid supporter of reflective journal writing, having experienced such positive personal growth from the exercise; therefore, this belief could potentially impact my research on both the collection and analysis levels. Finally, a potential limitation is the recruitment strategy. Only those passionate about the subject matter agreed to participate in the study. One participant was recommended by another participant, and two were sought out by myself based on my knowledge of their past experience with the writing strategy in question. Therefore, those voices of teachers who do not implement or condone this form of writing will not be included in this study.

## **Chapter 4: FINDINGS**

For this study, I interviewed three experienced educators who incorporate reflective journal writing into their everyday teaching practices. I have concealed the identities of the research participants by changing their names to one of their own choosing and by not including the name of their schools and/or school boards within this paper. This is a conscious decision and has been made in order to respect the anonymity of the participants. This chapter will present a brief background of my research participants; however, the focus will be a discussion of the major themes discovered through an in-depth analysis of the transcribed interviews. The themes are as follows:

Theme 1: Teaching Strategies

Theme 2: Impact on the Student

Theme 3: Impact on the Community

Theme 4: Challenges with Reflective Journal Writing

### **Background of the Research Participants**

The participants in this study were selected because of their beliefs about and commitment to reflective journal writing. All three participants are not only passionate about including this form of writing in their classrooms as often as schedules allow, they are also all avid journal writers themselves. The participants all have had a wide range of experience with a variety of age levels, each has a minimum of 20 years of teaching experience, and all have incorporated reflective journal writing into their classrooms throughout their long teaching careers. For these reasons, Christine (grade one), Karen (grade two), and Victoria (grade four) were selected as appropriate participants for this study.

### **Key Findings and Connections to the Research**

**Teacher strategies.** In this section I provide concrete examples of specific reflective journal writing strategies the research participants have chosen to include in their classrooms. I will explore the participant's reasoning behind the inclusion of these strategies, and the implications of their decisions. These examples will be supported with direct quotes from the interviews. I will begin by focusing on a few of the strategies that each of the three participants use and believe are successful.

**Consistency.** All three research participants agree on the importance of routine and consistency when it comes to the use of reflective journal writing. Christine, Karen and Victoria all see reflective journal writing as an important and necessary component of their classroom culture. However, the commitment to its inclusion does seem to vary among the participants. For example, Victoria claims to have a "realistic" approach and explains that she includes it as often as possible. She clarifies that depending on the week and the interest of her students, reflective journal writing may be a daily occurrence. Or in situations where time is more limited, there may only be 2-3 opportunities throughout an entire week. "... A couple times a week and depending on the class, some years I've done them daily, some years I do it less, because it's just that group of children that really like that interaction and because of time" (August 12th 2014). On the other hand, Karen and Christine view reflective journal writing as a fundamental, core component of their classrooms, something that cannot be displaced. Therefore, their students write on a daily basis, no matter the changes in the timetable or the disruptions throughout the week.

Christine explains that they spend a significant time each morning on writing, from 8:00-9:45. There are a range of writing exercises that take place during that time; however, reflective journal writing is always one of them. She states,

I include it [reflective journal writing]. It is essential. Every day. All the time... You know, and it's not their [the students'] decision, it's mine, and I want to foster it... by doing it and encouraging it, and being excited about myself, they're excited. (June 10th 2014)

Whether reflective journal writing is incorporated daily or as often as scheduling allows, all three teachers make the argument that the consistency of including this form of writing is an important component of each of their writing programs. Students not only need the time to practice journal writing on a routine basis, they also benefit from the time designated for personal reflection.

***Include a variety.*** One way these three teachers ensure that reflective journal writing is fully incorporated into their classroom routines is by including multiple different journals and by making cross-curricular connections. Throughout the interviews, my participants promote using a variety of journals in their classrooms. They discuss not only the strong potential for cross-curricular connections, but also recommend it as a valuable approach for those teachers that may be turned off by the time requirements of an effective reflective journal writing program.

Karen goes beyond the issue of time constraints and explains how curriculum changes may sometimes impact the “style” of reflective journal writing that she implements. For example, she describes the changes in the math curriculum and its new focus on incorporating and developing math literacy, conceptual understandings, and

more writing. This change to the curriculum motivated her to introduce a new math journal which addresses this new focus on writing within the mathematics classroom. For example, she explains if the class is working on three-dimension shapes, she uses the math journal to provide students with the opportunity to reflect on what they have learned and to develop a deeper conceptual understanding of the topic at hand. Students may create images, represent their thoughts in writing, and ask questions relating to the topic. (July 8th 2014).

Although math journals are the newest addition, Karen also swears by the inclusion of weekend journals and art journals. Weekend journals do not always relate to what transpires over the weekend, it is simply the open-ended journal that takes place during Language Arts. The final type of journal Karen uses in her classroom is the art journal, which she argues is the “most successful type of writing” that her students do in her class. She believes this to be the case because there is never a moment when the student has nothing to write and because “drawing and more artistic approaches to journal writing can help children get over the fear of it or to get over their negative attitudes”. The students are the experts when it comes to their own artistic creations, and she revels in the writing and reflecting that takes place within these specific journals (July 8th 2014).

Victoria also includes a variety of different journals and includes different cross-curricular connections with the journal writing in her classroom. She specified two different types during the interview; one is very similar to Karen’s “weekend journal” and often takes place at the beginning of the day as a sort of warm-up for her students,

and the second is more of a cross-curricular approach, also similar to Karen's "math journal". Victoria explains its role:

...Say we're starting a new unit in Science and sometimes, we'll start a conversation, but then I'll have the children go back and sit down and it's not always a notebook or page after page. It might be a graphic organizer, when I get them to sit down and just let me know what they know, what they are thinking about this topic and then mid-way through I might give them back the same activity and say okay "Go back and look at what you wrote. Do you have any other questions? Did any things get answered? What do you know now? What do you want to know?" (August 12th 2014)

My participants all support the inclusion of a variety of journals and argue the potential of using student journals to make connections across different subjects. This strategy shows students the importance of foundational writing skills and provides students with the opportunity to develop a certain level of comfort when it comes to exploring a variety of subject matter through their own writing.

***Student choice.*** All three teachers agree that one of the most important decisions a teacher can make when it comes to reflective journal writing is the decision to make the activity as unguided and student-led as possible. Discussions promoting the power of student choice also came up throughout the three interviews.

Christine's opinion regarding prompts for her students during reflective journal writing sessions was very clear. She simply stated, "Nope! I am very open. There are no prompts". When asked to explain why she believes in this very open-ended approach and why she has used it year after year, she explained her reasoning:

...I always say you have to write about things that are meaningful to you... you can't write about something we don't know anything about. It needs to be about something you experienced or about something you truly love, and then you're the expert and you can develop those ideas. (June 10th 2014)

Christine argues that the only way reflective journal writing is successful is when the students want to participate in it, and when the students take ownership over their own writing. She explains that her past experience has led her to believe that students need to have a certain level of control over what they are writing. She claims this control and the open-ended nature of reflective journal writing is in fact what positively impacts students' attitudes related to writing. Students need to be able to write about what they want, and their journals cannot become a prescribed assignment. If they become limited by narrow prompts, the potential for students to grow as individuals and as writers may be inhibited and students may grow less interested in the writing, as they become significantly more distanced from it.

Victoria and Karen guide their students somewhat more than Christine. With that being said, the goal is to move toward a more autonomous form of writing. Victoria wants her students to eventually be making all of the decisions relating to their writing by the end of their time together; however, she believes more guidance upfront can be beneficial as a means of support initially and throughout the reflective journal writing process. For example, at the beginning of the year she may provide prompts for her students, such as "tell me about your weekend" or "respond to this local news article" (August 12th 2014). She asks very concrete questions, but as time passes the prompts

become more open-ended, until she deems the prompts unnecessary and they disappear altogether.

Karen explains that she may begin her year with providing her students with a variety of graphic organizers to help organize their thoughts before starting a reflective journal writing entry; however, she rarely provides them with a topic to write about. There is the occasional time, she explains, when all of her students will write about the same topic and it will be prescribed. However, she claims that, “although it is the same theme, they are all drawing on their own different experiences”; therefore, it remains an individually relevant exercise (July 8th 2014).

Victoria and Karen both made a comment when discussing different prompts, which connects back to the argument Christine makes about reflective journal writing needing to be meaningful and relevant for the students. Both teachers explained that when they feel prompts are necessary, they try their best to choose ones that relate to issues or events taking place within their community. Victoria claims the following, “Our children, even at this age, are very aware of what’s going on. Like when the RCMP officers were killed [in Moncton, New Brunswick]. Our children in this generation arrived just upset, they know, not all of them, but some, they’d heard... children want to write about what is happening in the world” (August 12th 2014). Karen also asserts that she makes real-world connections as often as possible in order to make the students’ writing more relevant and meaningful. Karen says she often brings in newspaper articles, which would act as the inspiration for the writing that day (July 8th 2014).

Although the three participants have somewhat contradictory opinions on the role of prompts, and whether or how to include them in their classrooms, the goal remains the

same: All three teachers want their students to be independent, motivated, passionate writers, and they agree that an important component in nurturing this type of positive development for their students stems from making writing meaningful and relevant.

Students need to write from personal experience, and they need to have a voice throughout the writing process. If journals are too prescribed this opportunity is lost.

Karen explains what she views as the most valuable resource within her own classroom:

... Internal. ...their [the students'] writing should really stem from their own experiences. And if they don't have those, and sometimes they don't, then you have to try and create experiences for them by teaching them about new things they have never heard of before. So then in fact they are writing about those things they have learned about. And the experiences they write about are no longer somebody else's, because they have become their own. (July 8th 2014)

We know that when students have a certain level of control over their own education there is the potential for a stronger level of student engagement, a higher level of motivation, and ultimately the student may experience more (academic) success. Therefore, if we allow our students to be in full control over their own writing, at least with this single writing activity, the potential for their engagement rises. This engagement will ultimately lead to what we want for our future writers: to be self-sufficient, driven, and self-motivating.

**Feedback.** Providing feedback on your students' reflective journal writing process can be an overwhelming and at times a time-consuming task. This commitment may prevent or discourage teachers from including this writing activity in their classrooms.

My participants acknowledge these issues and provide a number of strategies that can help teachers deal with these concerns in the future.

Karen, for example, occasionally has her students share their work with the class. She explains that this activity allows her to provide feedback to her students, and for other students to develop important peer feedback skills. During group sharing, she has “the opportunity to watch the child read their writing and what they have done”, and it allows her “to personally comment”, while the other students learn and practice how to provide effective peer feedback (July 8th 2014). Karen views this activity as one way that allows for effective, timely feedback.

Another component my participants discussed was the amount of written feedback and how much is necessary and/or appropriate. Karen provides an example of the amount of written feedback she provides for her students. She explains that during the beginning of the year, she tries to read every journal entry, and make a comment in the bottom. My comment “has nothing to do with their semantics, it has nothing to do with their punctuation, anything. It’s just a comment” (July 8th 2014). However, as the year progresses the comments are less frequent, but more detailed. She responds every two weeks and claims that it is a sufficient amount of feedback for her students.

Christine and Victoria have a very similar approach to written feedback. Christine reads her students’ journals at the end of every day and writes a little note to them; she describes it as a “little letter”, which does not include corrections of writing conventions (June 10th 2014). Similarly to Karen, as the year progresses and the length of the journal entries expand, Christine provides her feedback less often. With that being said, she did make a point of stating how strongly she believes in the power of teacher feedback: “I

strongly like to give them feedback... I think feedback is very, very important. And it gets them excited about writing. Because when they get their journals back, and before they start their next one, they say, "Oh, what did Mrs. L say?" (June 10th 2014). Victoria explains that she provides written feedback for her students as often as possible and on sticky notes, which she posts inside her students' journals, because she does not want her handwriting to deface their work (August 12th 2014).

My three participants have similar approaches when providing their students with written feedback relating to their reflective journals. The focus is consistent, in the sense that the purpose is not to correct writing conventions or to grade the entries, but to acknowledge the hard work that is going into the student journals and to help the students build and maintain a positive relationship with writing. There is no need to focus on correcting or providing pages of written feedback for every single written piece produced by a student, as this is not the overarching purpose. The purpose is to provide students with an outlet to explore writing without the stress of attaining perfection.

***Teacher modeling.*** Finally, the strategy of teacher modeling occurred multiple times throughout the interviews. Christine and Karen stressed the importance of teacher modeling. Karen states it sweet and simple: "Teachers need to do what they preach" (July 8th 2014).

Karen says that she always models "a type of writing at least three times" before asking her students to write or use it (July 8th 2014). Christine has a similar system:

I do a lot of modeling every day, and I'm an excited writer. And so because I love to write, they love it. I think modeling is the big thing. Showing how its done, showing how you begin. And just playing that, like that verbal little conversation

you have with yourself. And I say to the kids “And now where do I start? How do I start this story?” And then they give me ideas. And we work a lot from, and I would say that’s really great, model it and then they go back and do it. And not huge gaps between the modeling. You model, you share, and then they go... So they’re not stumped. (June 10th 2014)

The research shows that teacher modeling is an important component that supports student learning (Cambourne, 2000; Lambirth & Gouch, 2008). Students need to see that adults use a process in their own writing and that writing takes work, that it does not necessarily come naturally, but takes practice. With this knowledge, students may learn to become resilient and to not give up on themselves or their own writing.

**Impact on the student.** This section will explore the impact participating in reflective journal writing has on the student as an individual. There are a variety of implications, and they will be supported with quotes taken from the interviews.

**Academic implications.** The main purpose of a reflective journal writing program is rarely to help students develop a firmer grasp or understanding of writing conventions. As mentioned in previous sections, the research participants do not formally “grade” or “mark” their students’ journal entries based on conventions or the actual “skill” of the writer. The purpose is to allow students to explore writing without traditional restrictions or the fear of failing, to promote a positive relationship with writing, and to show students that they can and should consider themselves writers.

Although the focus of this writing is not purely academic, this section will explore two of its academic implications: the increase of writing skills and its influence on future lessons, as it acts as an effective formative assessment tool.

*Improvement in writing.* Even though the focus of reflective journal writing is not necessarily to develop a stronger understanding of traditional writing conventions. When it comes to writing practice does make ‘perfect’. All three of the participants acknowledge the positive impact of reflective journal writing on students’ writing abilities. Christine explains the powerful impact this writing exercise has on her students:

They just become very good writers because they do it all the time, and things fall into place, and when I compare my [students’] writing sometimes with other writers, like you know just regular grade two child out there, I think they are very strong because they’ve had all this practice. (June 10th 2014)

Christine explains that journals provide her students with the opportunity to practice new strategies she introduces during her mini writing lessons. She provides the example of stretching words. The use of dictionaries are not entirely encouraged in Christine’s classroom, she describes them as a “time wasters” and too much of a disruption during the writing process. Her students may look up words on their own time, but not during time designated for journal writing. She goes out of her way to explain that the purpose is not to spell words correctly, that will come later. She taught her students how to stretch words as a decoding tool, and explains that you often see children using these new strategies and experimenting with them within their journals.

...They learn about stretching words and breaking it up into little syllables and they can decode it. So it’s like, today was caterpillar, was one of our main words this week. Cat-er-pill-ar. So you know how to spell “cat” and then you know all kinds of words with “er” like September, October, so you know that sound. And

it just builds up and so it's just little sounds put together, so they can decode everything. (June 10th 2014)

Victoria provides an example regarding one of her student who she believes to have a learning disability, although he has not been formally assessed. She explains how his reflective journal writing helped him become a stronger writer. She believes it was a combination of the lack of pressure to write perfectly, the fact that the focus was not on using proper writing conventions, and because it was a designated time for him to explore writing on his own. She said,

...writing was a huge block for him and when he was able to see that I would accept even if he only wrote two sentences, that it was okay, that was a big help for him... we were gradually able to move him along in writing so that by the end of the year he would write a couple paragraphs. (August 12th 2014)

Karen discussed the cross-curricular benefits of her reflective journal writing program. She says journal writing helps her students become confident and competent writers, which transcends all subjects. She stated, "It's a huge benefit academically, because it makes it so the students can then go write about science or write about math... the benefits are endless" (July 8th 2014). Christine experiences a similar success, "There isn't anything they [her students] cannot write about!" (June 10th 2014).

We can see from all three of these very different examples that the academic benefits of incorporating reflective journal writing truly are endless. Students become stronger writers as a result of the practice and they can overcome personal obstacles because of the freedom journals provide for them to explore writing without the pressure

or fear of meeting a certain standard right off the bat. This growth has a positive academic impact that goes beyond the language arts classroom.

*Impact on future planning and teacher instruction.* Another academic implication of reflective journal writing is the impact this activity can potentially have on the teacher's future planning. The students' writing can be used as both a formative and diagnostic assessment tool, because it can inform future instruction and provides teachers with important information about student comprehension. It also provides teachers with information regarding student interests, which teachers can take into consideration when creating their future lessons in order to further engage, motivate and inspire student learning.

Victoria uses her students' journals as a diagnostic assessment tool. Before starting a unit, she will provide the students with a prompt related to the new material, and will use their responses as a window into their understanding. She then uses this information in order to determine what she may need to revisit or introduce as a new idea all together. She states:

From a curriculum point of view, these writing activities can really allow me to know more what they know...So in a sense, some of this journal writing, especially in a curricular area, is almost like a pre-assessment. I get a sense of what the students know and where to take them from. (August 12th 2014)

Karen acknowledges her student journals as a useful diagnostic tool as well. She explains that she uses her student journals as "a reference point" for what she needs to teach next and states: "My mini-lessons come directly from the kids' writing" (July 8th 2014).

Student journals act as more than merely an assessment tool, all three participants see their students' journals as a valuable tool to learn more about their students, specifically their interests. The participants all admit to using information relating to student interest in order to create more engaging and meaningful lessons in the future.

Christine provides this example. She explains that a student in her classroom revealed her passion for dogs in one of her reflective journal entries during a peer feedback session. The class in turn shared their common love of dogs, which inspired Christine to develop an entire writing and reading unit with a dog theme. She states: "because we're writing about things that are meaningful, it influences the other children and now they're writing about their dogs, and we're reading about dogs, so it all works together" (June 10th 2014).

Victoria provides a different approach to including student interest in her classroom. She is less concerned with trying to incorporate student interest into class-wide lessons, as this has the potential to be an overwhelming task and may be "unfair", because not every student interest will be able to be incorporated to the same degree. Instead, Victoria uses the information learned from student journals in a different way. She draws on this knowledge in order to encourage individual students to explore certain topics further. Victoria provides an example regarding a student interested in outer space: "...if I know someone that just loves space, when we're doing explorations and he needs to do his assignment, I'm going to steer him towards the different space materials we have" (August 12th 2014). Victoria justifies this approach with the following, "when they [the students] have to write or do things like that they will do a better job if they're writing it and doing it about something they love and want to know more about. So,

definitely, student interest guides me. Without a doubt” (August 12th 2014). Karen has a similar belief. She explains that student interest “most definitely” impacts her teaching. She says that she brings books into the classroom based on the interests she learns from her student journals. Plus, she shares websites with more information on their interests in order to support further exploration (July 8th 2014).

Whether teachers choose to draw on information learned from their students reflective journals in order to inform class-wide lessons or individualized instruction, the positive impact of knowing students on a deeper level cannot be denied. Using student interest to inform future planning not only impacts a single student, it also has the potential to identify common interests among students and can lead to a stronger, more positive and unified classroom community. Developing lessons based on student interests also has the potential to lead to deeper student learning as a result of greater engagement.

***Develops a strong connection with the teacher.*** Discussion surrounding the relationship between student and teacher surfaced multiple times during the interview process. My participants agree that getting to know their students is a key component in the development of a positive and supportive learning environment. However, the conversations went deeper than that. The word “connection” came up repeatedly, and the participants discussed how their student-written journals have consistently provided them with the opportunity to create this strong connection with their students, which we know can impact the depth and breadth of student learning (Gehlbach, Brinkworth & Harris, 2012).

Victoria describes her students' journals as a place to build a more "authentic" relationship. As an elementary school teacher, she acknowledges the high frequency of student exaggeration that occurs within the classroom and often in face-to-face dialogue between her and her students. However, she explains that because her students know that she is the only person who is going to read their journals and because she only responds positively, she believes reflective journal writing provides her students with the opportunity to be truly honest with both her and themselves (August 12th 2014).

Victoria claims that it is this authentic relationship that allows her to demonstrate that she truly cares for each of her students. She believes that "feeling cared for, feeling safe, and feeling accepted" are all major factors, which influence student learning. She explains that the "little group of children" must want to be in her classroom "in order for learning to take place" (August 12th 2014). Connecting with her students by getting to know them through their journals is one way to ensure that students feel authentically connected to and respected by their teachers.

Karen and Christine view their students' journals and the information the students share with them as a strong demonstration of respect and trust. Both teachers explain that their students often share very personal information with them (Christine, June 10th 2014; Karen, July 8th 2014).

Victoria and Karen both mention the potential ethical dilemmas that may be revealed as a result of this strong student-teacher connection. Both have been involved in situations when a student has revealed something very personal in his or her journal, information that the teacher legally has to report to child services. The teachers describe these situations as incredibly difficult because the student has chosen to share an

extremely personal aspect of his or her life through journal writing and has done so in confidence, and more often than not without the knowledge that the teacher must make a formal report. Karen focuses on the positive: “Sometimes you learn things that you don’t want to learn in a journal, but that is also a positive thing that you know the child trusts you enough to write to you about that” (July 8th 2014). This is something to be aware of moving forward.

The power of feeling respected, heard, and connected to your teacher can be truly pivotal in the learning process. Research shows students experience deeper learning and personal growth when they have a teacher they feel connected to (Gehlbach et al., 2012). As we can see in this section, reflective journal writing has the potential to be an effective way to develop a stronger connection between the students and the teacher. It provides students with the opportunity to build an individual relationship, and gives the student a voice.

***Increase in confidence.*** Another result of reflective journal writing is the impact it can have on student confidence, both relating to writing and in a more general sense. My participants recognized the increase in student confidence and attribute a certain amount of this positive student growth to the practice of reflective journal writing. Although it is impossible to pinpoint the exact impact of student journaling, as there are a variety of factors that impact student development throughout the course of a year, all three of my participants remain confident in their beliefs that journals have a positive impact on student confidence and attitude.

Karen argues that reflective journal writing provides an opportunity for every student to be successful. It is an independent writing task meant to encourage and

promote a love of writing, where there is no student-to-student comparison and only effective teacher feedback to help propel the student forward. She explains that when writing “is approached in the proper way”, when students “feel as if they are on a level playing field with their peers” and “when your [the teacher’s] expectation is accommodated in a way that every child will feel celebrated for what they accomplish and where they have come from and where they have made it to, then the benefits are endless” (July 8th 2014). When asked about specific benefits, Karen went on to describe the most influential benefits as being “an increase in self-confidence”, followed closely by “an increase in self-esteem”, the belief of “being capable”, and “pride” (July 8th 2014).

Karen reflects on one student’s growth in particular. She described this young boy as “really tough” and having a “chip on his shoulder”. He did not show any confidence as a writer and would challenge her daily during the journaling session. She explained that by the end of the year “his whole demeanor softened” that “he became the child that never ever left the classroom without a daily hug” and he “became a writer”. She does not make the claim that it was only because of what they were doing in the classroom, but she feels confident that the safety he felt to express himself in his journal was “therapeutic for him”. Karen states: “Its therapeutic to be able to do that [write about what you are feeling]. So, of course it affects your attitude, and maybe not at home but certainly in the classroom” (July 8th 2014).

Victoria explains the growth in confidence that she witnesses annually in her reflective journal writing program. She explains her belief that anyone who writes is a writer, and believes that the over-arching idea of writing scares children because they do

not consider themselves to be “writers”. Victoria says that reflective journal writing provides her with the opportunity to convince her less confident students that they are in fact writers, as writing is writing. Once the students begin to see themselves as writers, she sees their confidence levels with writing and within the classroom environment change for the better (August 12th 2014).

Christine takes her claims a step beyond confidence and argues that the “best benefit” of reflective journal writing is that it has the potential to dispel the fear of failure, which students sometimes have associated with writing. When asked whether she has noticed any changes in student attitudes throughout the reflective journal writing process, Christine responded:

Absolutely! Well, mostly changes in attitudes about writing, the fear of writing. So that has been lifted and I hope it stays away, you never know what happens later on. Teachers get too critical about spelling and everything. So, it [reflective journal writing] takes away that overly critical component, and then their [the students’] fear. (June 10th 2014)

***Development of a positive self-concept.*** The development of a more positive student self-concept also presented itself in our discussions. This development goes beyond a mere shift in confidence; this change impacts how the student views himself or herself. Of course we cannot claim that these developments, similar to a change in confidence, are an exact byproduct of reflective journal writing; however, all three participants are confident this writing exercise has the potential to impact the development of the student self-concept in a positive way.

Christine claims to have witnessed changes in student self-concept. She explains that reflective journal writing provides her students with the opportunity to be themselves and to write at their own level without a direct comparison to their peers. This lack of competition allows the students, Christine believes, to “feel really good about themselves and confident”, and as a result, she states that “they become really proud about who they are”. She also thinks a pivotal factor in this growth is the way that reflective journal writing “puts them [her students] in touch with their feelings and their thoughts and their ideas”. This personal connection and self-reflection can lead to self-love and understanding (June 10th 2014).

Christine and Karen believe journals provide students with the perfect opportunity to document their personal growth and progress throughout the year. They both claim that when students are able to see their progress before them, they begin to feel proud of themselves and see themselves in a more positive light. Both teachers provide their students with opportunities to compare their more recent journal entries with their initial attempts. Christine says that this activity results in “shock”, “surprise” and “delight” (June 10th 2014).

Karen says that the sharing of student journals is a major opportunity of growth for her students. She explains that when a student’s writing is affirmed by his or her peers the result can be a more positive self-concept and a stronger sense of purpose (July 8th 2014).

Finally, when asked why she includes reflective journal writing as a core component of her teaching practice, Victoria provided the following statement: “It [reflective journal writing] allows children to think inward and outward, and forward and

backward at the same time” (August 12th 2014). She believes this sums up the writing exercise and results in both stronger writers, and also more positive children.

**Impact on the community.** Teaching strategies not only have an impact on the individual student, they can have class-wide implications as well. In the section that follows I will discuss a few of my participant’s observations surrounding their student sharing and providing each other with peer feedback, and the implications of these actions on the development of community in their classrooms.

*Sharing.* Traditionally, reflective journal writing has been a very personal, and at times even isolating, endeavor. However, in the modern classroom many teachers are taking this writing exercise to a new level and using their students’ journals as a tool to build community within their classrooms. All three of my research participants make the argument that having students share their reflective journal writing with the class has too much positive potential not to be taken advantage of. With that being said, none of them condone forcing any student to share his or her work nor do they support the daily sharing of personal writing. The participants are in agreement that there is a time and place for sharing, during which the potential to develop a positive community is great.

Victoria argues that her students have learned to respect each other as a result of sharing their journal entries. She acknowledges the potential for her students to feel uncomfortable or shy during the early stages of the sharing process, as “it can be a challenging thing to do... because it can be very vulnerable” (August 12th 2014). However, if all the students are given an appropriate amount of time to prepare and/or decide which piece they will be sharing, she has only experienced success. Providing her students with enough notice before the sharing will occur and letting her students know

before they even begin writing that the piece they create that day will be shared upon completion, is an even deeper way to show respect to her students and is her way of acknowledging the act of sharing as vulnerable.

Karen says that her reflective journal writing program is “huge” because it provides students with the opportunity to develop more authentic relationships. She states, “we always learn things that we didn’t learn about each other because we are listening to it come out in their writing”. She provides the following example, which argues that sharing reflective journal writing has the potential to create a sense of “family”:

...if there are children who come from a difficult situation, it comes out in their writing if they have fewer joyful things to write about, especially around the holidays, and other kids might know... they [the other students] intrinsically know and will help each other see the positives. They have an opportunity to affirm the other kids in the class because of what they know about them, because we build a sense of family, of community in our classroom. So, in the writing this has been emphasized. (July 8th 2014)

This quote demonstrates the potential of sharing student journals. We know that sharing information about our personal lives and learning more about each other is a fundamental aspect of building a strong community in our classrooms. Therefore, this form of personal sharing cannot be underestimated, and that is part of the reason these teachers take advantage of it (Greene & Mitcham, 2012, p. 13).

Another noteworthy belief: Karen describes how sharing student journals not only results in learning new things about each other, but also how this sharing leads to students

affirming each other. These affirmations from peers may have implications relating to student development, specifically the development of a positive self-concept, positive self-esteem, and a feeling of self-worth.

Christine also acknowledges this potential:

I think the children are very close to each other because of it [sharing their reflective journal writing]. They know each other's stories. They know each other's stories because of all the writing, and the kids are excited to hear each other's stories. (June 10th 2014)

This excitement and recognition of each other's stories leads to a stronger feeling of belonging and helps build a stronger community.

It is worth reminding ourselves of the reasoning behind and importance of building a strong sense of community in our classrooms. Student learning is more effective in a space in which they feel safe, heard and respected. Student dropout rates are lower when students feel that they belong in their classroom, and feel like they are an important and contributing member of a greater community. Therefore, if the inclusion of reflective journal writing can promote the development of a strong community, and community supports the aspects related to student success mentioned above, it will always be worth exploring different ways we can be promoting the growth of a positive sense of community within our classrooms, whether it be through teaching strategies, teacher-student interactions, or the incorporation of reflective journal writing.

**Peer feedback.** Along with having students share their reflective journal writing with each other, two of my participants identified the impact of peer feedback within their classrooms as significant. Karen believes that engaging the whole class in the

feedback process in a positive way not only helps her students with their writing skills, but also develops a more positive classroom community. Students are taught to use constructive language in order to help their peers develop their writing and to avoid negatively impacting the confidence levels of other students. Karen explains that the whole class becomes editors:

...we all become editors, and I say “okay, we’re going to put our editor’s hat on and everyone needs an editor. Adults need one, everyone does. When we edit with you, that just means that we are helping to make your story more clear to somebody... we’re just helping you make it so that people can read it easier...whatever you say needs to make the person feel good about their writing. It needs to be something they can do a little bit differently or something that they did really great. You’re not ever going to say anything unkind or mean. (July 8th 2014)

Her conscious approach to focusing on the positive and teaching her students the power of language and the impact of their opinion all have the power to play pivotal roles in the development of a stronger community. In this way, Karen uses reflective journal writing and the exercise of peer feedback in order to develop an even stronger sense of belonging and community within the four walls of her classroom.

**Challenges with reflective journal writing.** In spite of all the positive benefits of reflective journal writing that have been discussed previously in this chapter, there are a few challenges of incorporating reflective journal writing into the classroom. The topic of challenges came up infrequently throughout the interview process with all three of my research participants, in part because they are incredibly devoted to the inclusion of

reflective journal writing and are whole-heartedly committed to it. Although rarely mentioned, my participants referred to a few challenges, which will be discussed in this section. Teachers must be cognizant of these challenges in order to deal with them effectively and not waste unwarranted time and/or energy on a potentially preventable obstacle in an already time-consuming profession.

***Student is disinterested.*** The most common challenge mentioned by all three of the research participants is the potential for students to be disinterested in writing. The participants all link this disinterest to a lack of imagination. Victoria provides her perspective:

... the fact that children don't do as many unstructured things today as they used to, and because of all the screen time, I find that that type of writing [reflective journal writing] not very productive for many children because they haven't had the experience or haven't used their imaginations as much. That is a very blanket general statement and not true to all children, but certainly over the years I've seen a change. (August 12th 2014)

All three participants state that as a teacher in the 21<sup>st</sup> century they feel the need to create a lot of excitement within their classrooms because children are not as creative as they used to be. Victoria provides an example of how she supports the development and use of student imagination by using more creative media in her classroom, like the movie "Cloudy with a Chance of Meatballs (August 12th 2014)". Christine is committed to taking her students to explore the community and to get outside as often as possible in the hopes that the excitement will inspire her students to write about their lived experiences (June 10th 2014).

***Time constraints.*** All of the participants recognize the challenge of time. Reflective journal writing may be bumped from the list of teachers' priorities as a result of the constant pressure to address as much of the curriculum as possible, and the stress for students to achieve a certain testing-standard. Both of these pressures, among others, are very real and unless a teacher can convince his or her students, parents/guardians, and colleagues of the pedagogical importance of including reflective journal writing in his or her classroom, the risk of it being squeezed out as a result of limited time is very real. Karen sums it up with an all-encompassing statement: "Sometimes we just don't have enough time" (July 8th 2014). The need for teachers to get creative and use journals in more inventive, perhaps even cross-curricular way are a few strategies to consider.

***Lack of writing skills.*** One challenge surrounding the inclusion of reflective journal writing in the classroom may be your students' writing abilities. Christine has been lucky in her years of teaching younger grades and says that she has never "encountered a negative attitude" from a student who refuses to write. However, she explains that, "sometimes you hear kids that say 'I can't write'" (June 10th 2014). Karen makes a similar comment and states, "One challenge is when the child does not have any written language...if they do not have any of the fundamental skills to put their thoughts on paper" (July 8th 2014). Although this obstacle may seem insurmountable, both teachers explain their use of writing interventions in order to support their struggling writers through his or her reflective journal writing endeavor.

Christine says that she initially does not mind "writing their thoughts and then having them recopy that one line under mine". She argues that the importance of having

all students participate in the same writing activity and encouraging the feeling that all students are capable of meeting her reflective journal writing expectation (*i.e.* everyone can and will participate) is significantly more important than worrying about writing mechanics (June 10th 2014).

Karen has a similar approach to addressing this challenge and will document her student's thoughts, and have them recopy the sentences she has written. She justifies this intervention with the following statement:

I am trying to affirm their writing and their attitude about writing; I am not trying to affirm that they can actual do the manual aspect of it. I want everyone to know that they have ideas to share with other people. (July 8th 2014)

***Lack of parental and/or guardian involvement.*** The topic of parental and/or guardian involvement and their support regarding their child's reflective journal writing was an issue that resurfaced during all three interviews. All research participants agreed that parental and/or guardian support is not what it used to be. Christine explains that she used to "invite parents to come in and listen to their child read what they have written in their journals", but says that she does not do this anymore because her students' journals frequently come back from home unread, and parents are "too busy", "can't find the time" and "don't seem excited" or as "involved" (June 10th 2014).

Karen states that in certain cases parents will go as far as completing the journal entry themselves, because they believe the task of writing is much too difficult for their child to complete on his or her own. While other times "they will send it back undone and explain that their children didn't want to do it" (July 8th 2014). Karen had quite an emotional reaction while discussing this issue. She went as far as to say that the lack of

support she feels from some parents is “quite a sad reflection on the parent side of things” (July 8th 2014). In spite of this, she acknowledges that not all parents and/or guardians feel the same way and she asserts, “some parents are really excited to see how their children write” (July 8th 2014).

In spite of parents and/or guardians at times challenging her decision to use reflective journal writing in her classroom, Karen attempts to see things from their perspective and acknowledges that, “writing is one of the hardest things for the parents to help with if their kids can really write, because they don’t know how to direct them” (July 8th 2014). In order to prevent parents and/or guardians from feeling overwhelmed or hopeless in this process, which we know could result in a lack of support for the teacher, Karen takes the higher road and attempts to bridge the gap for her parents and/or guardians during her parent-teacher interviews. She says, “I try and take the opportunity during parent-teacher interviews to give them ideas of things they can do with their kids or advice. I try to provide some resources for them” (July 8th 2014).

Overall, none of the three participants admit to ever having had a parent or guardian object to the writing or to being contacted about being displeased with the inclusion of reflective journal writing. However, they do recognize the fact that parents and/or guardians seem less involved or concerned with their children’s schoolwork compared to previous years.

## **Chapter 5: DISCUSSION**

After completing this research, the question of its purpose still remains: the question “why” needs to be addressed. There are numerous ways this question can be approached, which will be explored in this chapter. First, I will focus on my own personal growth as a researcher and an educator. I will also discuss my recommendations, which are based on the collected data and analysis of the interviews. The purpose of these recommendations is to provide teachers with concrete ways to effectively include and support their students throughout the reflective journal writing process.

### **Reflection on the Research Process**

I was initially inspired to explore the topic of reflective journal writing because I have always felt strongly connected to it. As someone who has kept a journal for most of her life, it is hardly a surprise that I hold this form of writing quite close to my heart. My journal is a positive outlet to release and process my life experiences and learnings, which I believe has resulted in metacognitive growth and has allowed me to get to know myself on a much deeper, more authentic level. These factors are what inspired me to explore the reflective journal writing work teachers are doing in their classrooms and its impact on the community, but more importantly the student.

The interview process provided me with the incredible opportunity to engage in rich discussion with passionate and experience educators. It was during these conversations that my resolve to include journal writing within my own classroom started to strengthen. I truly connected with Karen when she described her number one concern as a literary educator:

It’s really about developing confidence. You cannot be a great writer if you don’t think you can do it. And if someone is always correcting everything you do, your

confidence wanes and you don't have anything left to give in your writing... we really need to build up the person they are [the student is] first (July 8th 2014). This approach to education aligns with my personal beliefs. Education is about building self-confidence and guiding our students on their journey to becoming resilient individuals. The way Karen uses reflective journal writing as a guiding tool to help both herself and her students on this journey is incredibly inspiring.

Engaging in this research process has also helped shaped my philosophy of teaching. The key findings that I will discuss in the following section (*i.e.* teacher modeling, student sharing, the role of the student) have become core components of my personal teaching philosophy. As educators, we need to “practice what we preach”, and encourage our students to be active, contributing members of the classroom community by truly engaging in their learning (Karen, July 8th 2014).

This research has also helped develop my teaching pedagogy. The importance of student involvement had a consistent presence throughout my research, from literature review to findings. This consistency has solidified my existing belief that students must play a central role in one's teaching pedagogy. My research shows that when students are more involved in or in control of the learning process, their learnings can go beyond our expectations. For example, when writing is unguided the potential for a stronger student-teacher relationship presents itself. Teachers have the opportunity to learn more about their students, and can then keep these interests and/or areas of growth (or strength) in mind moving forward with their planning. This acknowledgement of the role students play in our classrooms may result in both students developing a stronger rapport with peers and teachers, and more engaging (therefore more successful) learning experiences.

The central role of the student(s) was a strong theme that was recurring throughout my findings and has convinced me of its role in my personal pedagogy. I appreciate the fact that one's teaching pedagogy is never stagnant and always changing. However, I believe this idea will always be a component of mine; my pedagogy will always have the student at the forefront.

### **Recommendations**

After reviewing my key findings, I have three recommendations I would make to the educational community moving forward: the power of teacher modeling, the importance of student sharing, and the role of the student(s).

**The power of teacher modeling.** Teacher attitudes, interests, (dis)likes all follow them into our classrooms; therefore, educators need to be consciously aware of what they are or are not modeling for their students. My participants are all avid journal writers and incredibly passionate about both reading and writing. This passion and commitment to helping students develop a positive relationship with both reading and writing shone through consistently during the interview process. The participants go into detail about their personal beliefs related to the modeling process; however, one thing remained consistent across all three: modeling is an important facet of effective instruction, and modeling includes demonstrating both the processes and the passion.

My participants all mentioned modeling the process as a pivotal component of their reflective journal writing programs; whether it is demonstrating how they develop their own ideas, or reading one of their original pieces of writing. Demonstrating these processes for students is incredibly important. Students need to see that writing demands a certain level of commitment and ongoing practice.

Alongside these processes, educators need to be constantly humanizing the learning process and modeling failure. Dispelling the myth that adults are ‘perfect’ or that some people just ‘get it’ while others simply don’t or never will has the potential to dispel the fear of failure. Teachers need to be seen as life-long learners and need to be consistently modeling the learning process. When teachers show that they are vulnerable, admit when they do not know something, share their mistakes and the thought process behind correcting those errors, they are in turn allowing their students to take risks and to be vulnerable in their own learning. This risk-taking behaviour will result in a deeper engagement and commitment to learning and growing.

Finally, educators not only need to model the processes involved in writing, they need to consciously share and model their passion for writing. They can do this by engaging in reflective journal writing alongside their students during quiet writing time, and consistently demonstrating the personal joy they experience from writing. Educators need to be passionate about reading and writing, and they need to share that passion with their students.

**The importance of student sharing.** Upon reviewing my findings, the importance of student sharing appeared consistently across multiple themes. My participants shared their perspectives related to student sharing and its important role within the classroom. These are the positive consequences of student sharing put forth by my participants: student confidence seemed to rise as a result of student sharing, a stronger sense of a positive classroom community developed, classroom support grew as students learned more about each other, and sharing allowed students to develop more meaningful relationships as they discovered about common interests.

Moving forward, I would encourage educators to be aware of the social aspect of reflective journal writing and to provide their students with ample opportunity to share their work with their peers. Sharing their writing is a wonderful way for students to build authentic relationships, to provide student writing with a strong sense of purpose, and to give students the chance to practice writing for an audience.

With all of this being said, it is important to remember the personal nature of this writing and that some students may not feel comfortable sharing their work. As mentioned in the previous chapter, Victoria always provides her students with a significant amount of time to prepare, and acknowledges that it “can be very vulnerable” for certain students (August 12th 2014).

**The central role of the student(s).** Finally, an important factor for educators to consider moving forward, and something I have already discussed as having influenced my personal teaching pedagogy, is the role of the student(s) within the classroom. Students need to be the focus of teaching and a teacher’s approach to teaching must adapt as a result of information gathered within the classroom. The curriculum, of course, must be addressed; yet, how teachers fulfill this requirement and what is used to meet this expectation should depend on the class, but even more so on the individuals within that class. Every grade five class will be different; therefore, in spite of the content and the goals remaining somewhat consistent, the teacher’s approach must be fluid and flexible.

Reflective journal writing has the potential to provide teachers with valuable information and to be effective in their instruction, teachers must then use this information to adjust their teaching to reflect their students’ learning needs. These

changes may be content driven, inspired by learned student interest, or strategy driven, based on the feedback collected from ongoing assessment.

### **Further study**

I would encourage future research studies to take the following questions into consideration:

- What is the extent of the impact of teacher attitude on the student experience?
- What influence does teacher personal pedagogy have on student learning?
- Do the benefits and/or challenges experienced by teachers using reflective journal writing in their classrooms change across different grade levels?

Finally, I would be very interested in a study with a strong focus on the development of the student self-concept. As a result of both the time and financial limitations of my study, I was unable to explore this topic in as much detail as I had previously hoped. Moving forward, I believe this could make for a very exciting and thought-provoking study.

### **A Brief Conclusion**

In conclusion, after interviewing three teachers, all of whom are steadfast believers in the power of reflective journal writing and continue to implement this form of writing in their classrooms on a regular basis, I have come to the conclusion that there are three major considerations educators need to be aware of moving forward: the power of teacher modeling, the importance of student sharing and the role of the student(s). My three participants agreed on numerous issues surrounding the implementation of reflective journal writing; however, each teacher brought her personal flare to how she approached and used this writing exercise within her own classroom. Despite these slight

differences, the common ground remains clear; first, reflective journal writing is an incredible tool that has the potential to evoke positive changes within the classroom; second, educators cannot afford to ignore the central role students play, in this writing and in general; and finally, teachers play a crucial role in the level of success or failure of this writing exercise.

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## APPENDICES

## Appendix A: Letter of Consent for Interview



Dear

Date:

I am a graduate student at OISE, University of Toronto, and am currently enrolled as a Master of Teaching candidate. I am studying **reflective journal writing and the development of student self-concept** for the purposes of a major assignment for our program. I believe that your knowledge and experience will provide insights into this topic. I would greatly appreciate it if you would read the following, and if you feel comfortable, would agree to participate in my upcoming study.

I am writing a report on this study as a requirement of the Master of Teaching Program. My research supervisor who is providing support for the process is Clare Kosnik. The purpose of this requirement is to allow us to become familiar with a variety of ways to do research. My data collection consists of a 40-minute interview that will be recorded by a small device and fully transcribed. I would be grateful if you would allow me to interview you at a place and time convenient to you. I am hoping to conduct the interview in person; however, accommodations can of course be made and the interview may be conducted face-to-face or online, depending on your preference and availability.

The contents of this interview will be used for my assignment, which will include a final paper, as well as an informal presentation to my classmates and/or potentially at a conference or publication. I will not use your name, your school, your school board or any information that might identify you in my written work, oral presentations, or publications. This information will remain confidential. The only people who will have access to my work will be my research supervisor and my course instructor.

You are free to change your mind at any time, and to withdraw from the study even after you have consented to participate. You may decline to answer any specific questions. I commit to destroying the voice recording of our interview and the transcript after the paper has been presented and/or published which may take up to five years after the data has been collected. There are no known risks or benefits to you for assisting in the project, and I will share with you a copy of the transcript to ensure accuracy if requested.

Please sign the attached form, if you agree to be interviewed. The second copy is for your records. Thank you very much for your help.

Yours sincerely,

Researcher name: Kirsten Del Bel

Phone number: (647) 227-3454

Email: [kirsten.delbel@mail.utoronto.ca](mailto:kirsten.delbel@mail.utoronto.ca)

Research Supervisor's Name: Clare Kosnik

Phone number: (416) 978-0227

Email: [clare.kosnik@utoronto.ca](mailto:clare.kosnik@utoronto.ca)

### Consent Form

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I acknowledge that the topic of this interview has been explained to me and that any questions that I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand that I can withdraw at any time without penalty.

I have read the letter provided to me by Kirsten Del Bel and agree to participate in an interview for the purposes described.

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Name (printed): \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix B: Interview Questions



### Participant Background Information

1. How long have you been a teacher?
2. What are your specific qualifications? (*i.e.* additional qualifications, teachables, diplomas, degrees.)
3. Would you say you have more experience within the elementary or secondary classroom?
4. What grades do you teach? What grades have you taught?
5. How would you define “reflective journal writing”?
6. How would you define “student self-concept”?

### Teacher Practices (What? How?)

1. How long have you used reflective journal writing in your classroom?
2. What initially inspired you to use reflective journal writing in your classroom?
  - a. Do you remember past teachers implementing similar writing activities when you were a student? If you do, do you remember whether you enjoyed the experience?
3. Which specific strategies or instructional methods do you use in order to incorporate reflective journal writing into the classroom?
  - a. Describe a typical lesson
  - b. What do you do?
  - c. What do you see?
  - d. How do you know if it has been successful?
4. How do you provide your students with feedback? Do you find the chosen strategy(ies) effective?
  - a. How do you know whether it was effective or not?
  - b. Have you used different strategies across different years?

- c. Does the level of your feedback or involvement ever depend upon the student?
5. What is the process that you use? What resources or materials do you rely on? (ex: books, pictures, etc.)
6. Do students work on reflective journal writing only individually or is it a collaborative/group activity?
  - a. How do you decide? Does it depend on the day/the class?

### **Influencing Factors (Who? How?)**

1. Have you experienced any benefits as a result of using reflective writing in your classroom? Describe them.
2. How has the use of reflective journal writing impacted the sense of community in your classroom? Why or why not?
  - a. Have you seen similar changes across different classes? Or is each change individual and dependent on the class?
3. What have you learned about your students or a particular student that you didn't know prior to this activity? Or Has this activity helped you learn anything about your students or a particular student that you didn't know beforehand? Describe this experience in detail.
4. Does the incorporation of reflective journal writing help you get to know your students in a more authentic and/or different way? If yes, how does this knowledge impact your teacher-student relationship? Can you think of a specific situation with a certain student?
5. Does the information you gain regarding your students throughout this activity have any impact on your future planning or the direction of your lessons? How so?
6. What changes have you noticed in your students that could be connected to the inclusion of reflective journal writing?
7. Have you noticed any changes in attitude, confidence levels or the self-concept within your students as a result of participating in reflective journal writing? Please describe the changes and how you have recognized them.

8. Have you noticed any changes in your students' writing abilities and/or academic success as a result of participating in reflective journal writing? Please explain.
9. What challenges have you experienced as a result of using reflective writing in your classroom?
10. What external and/or internal aspects do you recognize as having an impact on the success level of this writing activity?
  - a. Does a specific successful or unsuccessful experience stand out? What do you think may have led to successes or challenges?
11. To what degree is your decision to include these reflective journal writing strategies dependent upon your students and/or their feedback?
12. Do the students seem to enjoy it? How do you know?
13. Do other teachers in the school use reflective writing as you do? Why/Why not?
14. Do you have the support of the parents? Does this support, or lack thereof, impact your decision to include the activity in the classroom?

**Personal Question:**

1. Do you have personal experience with journal writing? Do you keep a journal?

**Next Steps/ Advice**

1. What strategies would you recommend to other teachers looking to implement reflective journal writing into their own classrooms?
2. Can you think of any further support, which would make you more likely to include these strategies in your classroom in the future?